



Hassle Within The Railway Coach: Case-Study On Everyday Hurdles Of Women Hawekrs In A Local Train

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Abstract:

Life is not same for all. Women face discrimination and face competition in every sectors of their lives. Every day thousands of women struggle to earn their living especially because of the competition with the men of the society. Women as hawkers are truly vulnerable to a no. of exploitations and harassments. Nearly thousands of women especially from the later middle aged group take up vendoring in local trains to sustain from their poverty. The research selected 3 respondents who hawk in the main line trains running in between Barrackpore and Sealdah, adopting convenient sampling and study their living conditions. These respondents were interviewed and participant observation method was followed. It is noted that the train hawkers follow the Railway Act and get the licenses through Sealdah Hawkers Union. The study mainly focuses on everyday life of these three female hawkers and the complexities that led them to be in this informal sector. The study also examines how they face the vulnerabilities of exploitations. . Everyone constantly puts a man before women no matter how much efforts she put in for balancing everything. Women and men face unequal treatment all over the world in all sectors of their lives. So it is important to know more about these unnoticed lives which we see every day.

Keywords: Gender inequality, daily hardships, hassle, harassment, exploitation.



1.1 Introduction:

Indian train is a big bazar on wheels. Persons who are selling, hawking or vending goods and services in the train or at the platform of a railway station are called Hawkers. They are part and parcel of the railways and everything (safety pin, food, shoe-polishing to CD player) is available from them. The study has been conducted to analyse the socio-economic conditions of female railway hawkers who sell their items between Barrackpore and Sealdah in the state of West Bengal. The working life of hawkers is explained in terms of their financial conditions, their working hours, and the issue of valuable services, legal status, contribution to the urban economy, their double shift work, gender differences and sharing of space. The study shows that hawking is one of the sensitive jobs, always be active and alert with opened eye, ear and mouth and they have extremely a long working hour. Now they are facing a lot of problems of opposition from railway authority, passengers and policemen, but their service contribution to the railways cannot be ignored.

Hawkers are identified as self-employed workers in the informal sector who sell their goods and services inside the running train or at the platform of a railway station for livelihood. West Bengal is one of the most populated states in India where majority of the people lives in rural areas and working in informal sector. In Railways, hawkers (unauthorized) are not allowed to sell their goods and services at the platform or in the running train, but due to unemployment problem, Railway looks the matter in a humanitarian ground. Various studies have already confirmed that hawkers are the most marginalized section of the urban poor and migration from rural areas are still continuing as it is one of the easiest ways of more earnings.

Jumani (1991) has attempted to divide the self-employed persons into two parts; one is self-employed people from high and middle income groups and another is self-employed people from lower income groups. The second category of self-employed people includes the rickshaw pullers, hawkers, street vendors etc. Bhattacharya and De (1987) in their study of street vendors of Calcutta explained that street vendors are

those people who do not have a permanent place of their own and who offer goods and services without having proper trade license for sale from public spaces. More than 10,0000 street vendors are in Kolkata only. The National Classification of Occupation 1968 defines street vendors as hawkers, peddlers and pheriowalas who sell different items of daily needs like vegetables, fruits sweets, cloth, utensils, electronic items and toys, on footpaths or by going from door to door. They may purchase goods from manufacturer or wholesaler or may prepare and sell their own product.

According to the existing policy documents, the term urban vendors include both traders and service providers, stationary as well as mobile vendors. The characteristics and nature of jobs of railway hawkers are almost similar to street vendors. The main differences are place of work (footpath for street vendors and platform for railway hawkers) and nature of goods (mainly uncooked goods for street vendors and cooked or ready to eat food for railway hawkers).

Howrah and Sealdah are the two most important railway junctions in West Bengal where a large number of both local and express trains are moved and hawkers are available in 24 hours due to its geographical location and infrastructural facilities. In railways, both at platform and in the running train we can find more food items being served by hawkers (unauthorized) than the licensed staff of pantry car or the authorized stall at railway stations. Sometimes we see very well and hygienic foods available with hawkers than the foods provided by the railways or the contractors appointed by the railways for this purpose. There are so many trains without pantry or food services where the hawkers are only the source of food for the passengers. The Indian trains are known to be running extraordinarily late and in that case pantry services stop providing food; in such scenario again one has to depend on hawkers.

Rail hawkers - particularly women - have little to expect by way of redemption. They have no positive legal sanction to carry on a trade that requires them to slog from daybreak to late at night. Even the city-based Hawker Sangram Committee, that fights for the rights of hawkers, has few railway women in its midst. Add to this the occupational hazard peculiar to women - most of them don't dare to take on the 'general' compartments. The fear of being harassed restricts them to the ladies' compartment, and this prevents them from earning as much as the men.

The social significance of this topic is to understand how women face challenges in every small sectors and the hardships of their lives and the competitions they have while sharing the same space with men even in their allocated space. This difference is because of the process of socialization and stereotypes of the gender roles that stops women more from a particular sector as compared to men.

The topic was taken by the researcher to understand how the women who sell items daily in the main line local trains of Sealdah division north. They are increasing these days in no. and again sharing the space with men even in the female compartments. Men who are vendors easily get on all the coaches and occupy their space while mostly the women vendors choose to sell in the female coaches. Hence, beside their complexities of life that led them to get into this occupation they also face competition with the men of their

sector. The researcher also tries to find out how the lives of these women have been through since they started their work.

1.2 Unequal Labor: Women's Work and Informal Sector Dynamics

The difference between men and women have been deeply rooted in our Indian society. The patriarchal system puts the women in an inferior position to that of men in all sectors. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), 81.8% of women in India work in the informal economy, which is the economy that is not taxed or under the table. Women's participation in the informal sector increased from 42.5% in 2009-10 to 46.5% in 2015-16. The unregistered workforce makes a significant contributor to the Indian economy. However, women in informal employment earn lower wages than men. The types of informal work women do as market or street vendors, hawkers, or homeworkers, expose them to risks to their physical safety and health. A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the contribution of women to India's GDP through the informal sector is between 20% and 50%. Despite women's significant contribution, they face numerous challenges. They are often engaged in low-paying and precarious work, and their working conditions are substandard. An ILO report states that women in the informal sector earn 40% to 50% less than men in the same sector. The formal sector also doesn't fare much better in this case. Women in the labour market worldwide continue on average to earn 23% less than men for the same job or, to put it another way, are paid 77 cents for every dollar men get, according to the United Nations. The men are the controlling i.e. the ruling and power exercising group.

There have been contradictory views as well regarding the structuralism point of view of looking at the informal sector. It has been argued that in the developing countries informal economic activities even in case of entrepreneurial manner are mostly associated to marginal behaviour and meagre endurance of the economically struggling class (Nigam, 1987; Lubell, 1991; Fashoyin, 1993). Whereas, some are also of the view that the believe on the existence of informal entrepreneurial dynamism is far from real, and these informal entrepreneurs constitute of a population who are unprotected from social security, who are engaged in survival strategies to overcome their daily struggles for living and most the time exploited by variables such as local authorities and regulations along with connivance of the state (Birkbeck, 1979; Lomnitz, 1982). And then there are those who go further to contradict to structuralism claiming that many developing countries, state policies create an environment that encourage the emergence of this informally self-employed class (Leonard, 2000). The arguments indicate that informal sector is viewed as the by-product of the state's inability to provide enough opportunities in the mainstream formal sector (Debrah, 2007).

2.1 Literature Review:

A hawker is a vendor of merchandise that can be easily transported; the term is roughly synonymous with peddler. In most places where the term is used, a hawker sells inexpensive items, handicrafts or food items. Whether stationary or mobile, hawkers often advertise by loud street cries or chants, and conduct banter

with customers, so to attract attention and enhance sales. When accompanied by a demonstration and/or detailed explanation of the product, the hawker is sometimes referred to as a demonstrator or pitchman (Mazumdar and Ghosh, 2017). The railways often termed as the 'lifeline of the nation' directly provides a means of living to many people and also offers jobs to many people of the country irrespective of their cast, creed and religion. It is widely believed that the unorganized sector in India suffers from a low productivity syndrome, compared to the formal and organized sector. The prominent features of the sector are lower real wages and poor working / living conditions. The hawkers thrive on creating drama, grabbing attention with pithy dialogues and hopefully making a sale.

India has its inherited problem of poverty which is obviously due to the ever expanding population. In the recent decades the nation witnessed rapid growth in the relocation of rural dwellers in the direction of cities in hunt of better opportunities and lucrative employment. They are generally low skilled with negligible to no educational background but their urge to earn brings them out of their dwellings. They usually place themselves in daily wage works and temporal earning ways. They sometimes occupy spaces in pavements, public/private spaces to engage in some business, in essay they are termed as street hawkers/vendors (Bhowmik, 2005). It is to be noted that such informal businesses serve the general population and hence serve the society at large.

Roughly in metropolitan cities like Mumbai and Kolkata had roughly 2.5 lakh street hawkers each and cities like Ahmedabad and Patna bears 80,000 street hawkers (Bhowmik, 2003). Female hawkers were seen selling relatively lesser quantity of supplies than those sold by men, consequently earning less (Bhowmik, 2010).

The studies from school of structuralism argue that informal sectors economic dynamism becomes distinct in the times of structural adjustment, recession or excessive regulation. In such situations, the entrepreneurial activities of the unorganized sector are considered not so marginalized rather an alternative, ever evolving informal source of jobs and income and a driver of economic growth (ILO, 2002; Rakowski, 1994; World Bank, 1989).

There is an assertion regarding such informal alternate sources of jobs and if incomes are not tackled with care than its economic potential will be wasted with the inherent weakness dwelling in the shadow such as low returns, stumpy output, and inadequate skills and expertise. They suggest intervention of the state in a progressive manner with an aim to engage higher productivity and proper access to resources such as capital and finance (Meagher, 1995).

Interestingly, as the budding economies is incapable to incorporate this on hand informal work force, consequently the less opportune class find alternate ways of earning and to occupy themselves for avoiding unemployment (Connolly, 1985). Conclusively stated by Weiss (1987) that; informal economic activity usually rises out of the necessities of the marginalized sector of the populace to circumvent inadequacy of the state to provide gainful job opportunities. Although, both marginalism and structuralism has separate set of views regarding the composition and constitution of the informal sector; it has been observed that both

agreed upon one basic aspect which arises out of the discussion namely necessity of the economically unsound classes.

Despite the various research works on train hawkers, focus on specifically women hawkers were inadequate which this study tries to examine. The everyday lives of female hawkers in the local trains, why they took up this profession, how much they earn, what problems they face, and how they are exploited.

2.2 Objectives of the study:

- Study everyday lives of female hawkers and why they choose to take up hawking in local trains as a profession.
- Understand how they are vulnerable to harassment and exploitation.

2.3 Limitations of the study:

The concerned survey had certain limitations due to less time in hand and no extensive financial support nor someone to help the researcher throughout the case study. Thus only three female hawkers were interviewed and the research was conducted. Also only the female hawkers are limited to only the main line trains between Barrackpore and Sealdah of West Bengal.

3.1 Methodology:

Methodology is basically the underlying theoretical or philosophical idea that shapes our research” (Ahuja, 2001). In this research the aim of the researcher is to understand the social relations and everyday life of the women hawkers and how they face problems while sharing the space with men in the local trains between Sealdah and Barrackpore. Case Study methodology and Interpretive methodology has been used in this research. Interpretive methodology is a sociological research method that focuses on understanding subjective experiences and human behaviour in relation to society. It's also known as interpretive research, interpretivism, or interpretive sociology. Interpretive methodology relies on questioning and observation to understand a phenomenon, and is closely associated with qualitative methods of data collection. Qualitative data is usually expressed through words, often using controlled vocabulary, rather than numerical figures. Exploratory research design has been used in this particular research work as it tries to explore the life experiences of the women hawkers and how they are associated with hawking in the local trains between Sealdah and Barrackpore. This paper explores the social experiences of the female hawkers, their everyday life, problems and reasons for them being in this informal sector.

3.2 Method:

Method refers to the range of techniques that are used to collect evidences from the society and relate the theories with the social life. The research is conducted by Qualitative methods. The researcher conducts case studies on four female hawkers due to the limitation of time and to collect data in a relatively short span of time, so case study was an easy method for collection of data. The case study method has been found suitable to explore and know in depth about the lives of the female hawkers and their socio-economic conditions and everyday struggles.

3.3 Sources of data:

The study consists of both primary and secondary data. Primary data is the fresh hand information and it is collected through the questionnaire method of data collection. While secondary data used were the data that has been already available and already been published. The data were also collected from books journals magazines websites etc.

3.4 Sample Size:

The concerned research paper uses non-probability sampling because it's non-scientific study and the concerned research just wants to explore the topic. Convenient sampling has been used in this study as it is the type of sampling where the researcher has only few subjects who are characterized by the qualities that the researcher's seek. Convenient sampling has been used for collection of primary data for the research. This sampling technique has been used as few respondents were known to the researcher and were available. Thus the sample size is limited to three in this study.

3.5 Area of research:

Main line local trains running between Barrackpore and Sealdah railway station in West Bengal.

4.1 Theoretical Relevance:

The concerned research has used many theoretical perspectives in support of the arguments and to establish the objectives of the concerned research paper. Sociology started to take shape and focus on social structure, social system, social institution, industrialization, urbanization, social relationship, in short on the macro aspect of understanding society and the social environment in which we live. In the pursuit of the macro-social analysis and causal inferences the study of every day and how these days brought about the necessary pattern and diversity seemed a trivial issue though sociology never lost the significance of daily practices.

The lived experiences of female railway hawkers can be effectively analyzed through several intersecting sociological frameworks, beginning with **feminist theory**, which foregrounds the gendered division of labor and unequal access to resources. Feminist theorists argue that women's work, particularly in informal sectors, is frequently undervalued and excluded from social protections (Chant, 2013; Kabeer, 2012). Female railway hawkers often juggle productive labor (vending) and unpaid reproductive labor (childcare and domestic work), thereby occupying a dual burden that reflects broader patterns of gender inequality in urban informal economies. This insight is central to understanding why female hawkers are especially

vulnerable to state surveillance, eviction, and exploitation, despite their essential role in sustaining household economies.

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1989), further enhances our understanding by examining how overlapping identities—such as gender, class, caste, and migration status—compound marginalization. Many female hawkers are not only women but also belong to historically oppressed caste groups or are internal migrants with precarious legal status. As a result, they face multi-layered discrimination in accessing vending permits, safe workspaces, and legal recourse. Policies that appear neutral in language often have disproportionately negative impacts on women, particularly those situated at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Informal economy theory challenges the notion that street vending is chaotic or peripheral. Scholars such as Portes and Castells (1989) and Hart (1973) argue that informal work is a rational response to structural unemployment and economic exclusion. For female hawkers, vending provides a vital means of survival in the absence of formal employment opportunities. However, the lack of legal recognition and institutional support places them at the mercy of local authorities and private contractors, rendering their livelihoods insecure. This reflects the structural inequalities that push women into informal employment while denying them basic protections.

From an **urban sociology** perspective, female hawkers' experiences are shaped by their daily contestation over space and visibility. Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the "right to the city" underscores the importance of equitable access to urban public spaces. Yet, female hawkers frequently encounter harassment, eviction, and spatial exclusion in railway stations, which are often male-dominated environments. The act of vending becomes a gendered claim to space, asserting presence and agency in urban landscapes that systematically marginalize informal workers (Harvey, 2008).

In addition, **social reproduction theory** offers valuable insights into the invisible labor that sustains families and economies. Thinkers like Bhattacharya (2017) and Federici (2012) argue that capitalism depends not only on waged labor but also on unwaged activities—many of which are carried out by women. Female hawkers' work enables the daily survival of households, supports children's education, and buffers against poverty, yet this labor remains under-recognized and unprotected. Their informal work is, in essence, a crucial part of social reproduction that deserves visibility and institutional support.

Finally, **Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity** (Durkheim, 1997/1893) helps explain the strong communal ties among female hawkers. In the face of state neglect and systemic exclusion, women often form mutual aid networks—sharing food, child care, and defense strategies against police crackdowns. These solidaristic practices create a moral economy of support that sustains them in harsh urban environments. Thus, even in the absence of formal protection, collective moral norms foster resilience and social cohesion among female informal workers.

Together, these theoretical lenses highlight the complex, gendered, and structural realities that shape the everyday lives of female railway hawkers. A multi-theoretical approach allows us to understand their marginality not as individual failure, but as a consequence of intersecting systems of economic, gender, and spatial exclusion.

5.1 Findings and discussions:

The social and economic relationship among these female hawkers in the local train is a key aspect to explore in understanding the significance of the everyday lives of these women and the challenges they face in various aspects of their lives. Through the interviews conducted with the female hawkers, valuable insights have been gathered regarding their everyday lives. One of the significant findings is that these female hawkers have had a compelling factor to be a hawker and no one took this occupation by choice but due to lack of any other option to be financially independent.

Thematic analysis has been done to interpret the data collected from these three female hawkers.

- **Compelling Factors –**

1. Each one of the female hawkers had their own reason of coming in this profession. Three of them belonged from the rural regions and they come far to the urban areas to sell their items. All of them belonged to the Below Poverty Level and were scheduled castes which promotes how lower class even these modern times reflect lower class and poor standards of living.
2. All three were married at a very young age and had children to raise. One was married at 14, one at 15 and the other at 17 which reflects that in rural areas child marriage is still prevalent despite the laws that prohibit child marriage. One had a child at the age of 18 and got widowed just a few days later. So in order to raise her child and being the only sole earner of the family she was compelled to come in this profession. Another woman was married to a blind man, and thus she became the earner of the family when her in-laws refused to provide the couple any shelter or any economic support. The other woman married a factory worker who lost his job when the mill was closed and he became depressed and fell prey to addiction of various kinds. She had no choice other than taking the responsibility of working.
3. Out of three respondents 2 were illiterate and one had a schooling till class 7 until she was married. Their illiteracy and lack of any prominent educational qualification left them with no choice than to become a hawker.
4. The three hawkers were of three different age groups. One was a young adult woman of 25, one was a middle-aged woman of 51 and the other was already a senior citizen of 62. Two of them had children who did not look after them and thus they eventually could never leave their work and take rest while the other woman had a small child whom she carries while she is hawking in the train.

- **Everyday life and struggle-**

1. All the three respondents of the study has a very difficult everyday life. They wake up at around 4-5 am in the morning, make food for their family, take their packed items and leave their homes around 6-7 am. They take up some train from their respective areas and then come to Barrackpore. They don't their items while travelling to Barrackpore because they are not allowed to sell items except the designated stations according to their respective hawkers' union. This reflects their double-shift workload.
2. All the three respondents of the concerned study were the sole earner of their family which puts an extra pressure on them and their earnings. They have bare minimum profit margins which makes it difficult to sustain the high priced market.
3. Now a days children once they grow up get married and eventually do not look after their parents. This makes their old age difficult to survive.
4. They have no policies or allowances that promote their growth and well-being rather there are laws and norms that keep them under constant threat and pressure at all times.
5. They have explained that being a woman makes it more difficult for them to be in this profession. There are many male passengers who harass them. They are also scared of the higher officials and the GRP and RPFs who forcefully bride them and can harass and abuse them if they don't fulfil their requirements.
6. Sometimes the sharing of space becomes a major concern for them. When two or more hawker sells the same item their sales get compromised. Also the male hawkers taking up their space in the ladies compartment is a major concern for all of them.

- **Overall well-being-**

1. They don't have any leisure nor any relaxations at work. The government has no measures that make their lives easier. Their lives are always prone to difficulties.
2. Their health is also compromised as they cannot take any specific measure for their own well-being nor can they afford any optimum medical help. They have to rely on the government hospitals which are not also appropriate to address their problems immediately.
3. They are also at risk to accidents while hanging their compartments sometimes.
4. They are ill-treated by some passengers too when the trains are overcrowded.
5. Their mental health is also at stake and they have to adjust and compromise in all sectors of life. There is almost no one to take care of them.
6. Many are subjected to various mental issues which they are unaware of and remain untreated throughout their lives.

5.2 Interpretation:

The researcher has found out that almost all the female hawkers belong to the marginalized section of the society. Lack of education, poverty, early marriage, alcohol addiction of their husbands and gambling, poor health all are the major factors that stop their progress to some extent.

Hawking being an easy to avail job that requires very less investment led many women take several risks at stake and came to this profession. They face a number of troubles due to the lack of governmental support and care.

The passengers were found to be mostly non-empathetic towards the hawkers. They can be more patient and kind to these hawkers. Even if they don't buy their products at least they can make some space for them to earn their daily bread.

Women hawkers face many challenges, including health hazards, sanitation issues, and a lack of safety. Women street vendors may experience health issues like high blood pressure, menstrual cycle delays, migraines, acidity problems, and increased blood sugar. Women street vendors lack access to sanitation facilities, such as washrooms and solid waste removal systems.

Women vendors face harassment by public authorities and a lack of effective government response to work-family conflict. They may also be threatened with eviction from their workspace. Women hawkers also face instability in their employment, low labour income, and a lack of social protection, welfare, or financial security.

The government has not taken much step for the development and betterment of these people's lives. The government can be more aware of the problems of the lower class people because that would eventually reflect development. Government and other NGO's have not taken much steps to improve the lives of these women vendors. They can take steps to improve these women vendors by giving them training development programmes. In general women working as vendors face these challenges they are as follows: economic pressure, socio-cultural challenges, adverse political conditions and operational challenges.

Thus, it can be said that though India has witnessed an increased in female railway hawkers, the government is indifferent to specific needs of this sector. These hawkers perform an important role in providing services to the urban population especially the poor. Street vending, train hawking and petty trading activities from the essential core of informal economic sectors in developing nations help in generating income with minimized investments of financial capital and without requiring large human capital.

6.1 Conclusion:

The findings of the study reveal that most of the hawkers have come from the marginalized section of the society and it is an easy way of earnings. Although hawkers are unauthorized and create several problems, but the role of hawkers in providing various services specially bottled water and tea/snacks to Indian Railways cannot be ignored. Hawkers providing fresh goods at cheap and innovative too. Services provided by IRCTC and authorized food stall are not satisfactory.

Most of the hawkers exhibit excellent business skills. Though their education level is low but, they have picked up an extraordinary talent to convince a person to buy any goods. The Indian trains are known to be running extraordinarily late, only hawkers can satisfy the needs and demands of the passenger. Hawkers not only sell goods but also provide valuable current train information to the passengers. A passenger trusts more on hawkers for current information of train rather than the person on duty in the enquiry counter – this is the ground reality.

The main problem is that the number of hawkers is increasing day by day and inter-class clashes occur regularly. Railways may be benefited from hawkers by issuing license or card with minimum fees per annum and may restrict for a number of trains a hawker can cover and time limit per train per day. Railways owned product (bottled water) can easily sold by the hawkers. Hawking area at platform may be constructed where a large number of food stall and hawkers will be available for sale of goods and inter-class clashes can be avoided.

Women already have a dominated life in every sphere of their lives. Being a woman hawker and selling items in a local train is not a very easy job. Local trains are unimaginable without hawkers. They face a lot of problems including economic, physical and many more. Women being the most dominated group of the whole human race always face an extra load of troubles be it from their homes or their workplace. They take up a lot of challenges to earn their daily bread and run the house where they have to share space with the other male hawkers.

As this occupation requires more physical energy and power of movement therefore, it does not make their life economically sufficient in long run. Hence, financial stability of the hawkers has not been achieved so far. Railways, State Govt. and NGOs should take steps to improve this sector and make attention to those people who are involved in this sector by providing license, coverage of Insurance and PF, healthcare, SHGs-microfinance, hawking area, accidental benefit, old age pension etc. Awareness programme like control of tobacco use, lottery ticket purchase, gambling, savings in chit fund, family planning etc. may help them to develop their life in the society.

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